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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR R, P, AND EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: COMBATING EXTREMISM: EMBASSY EFFORTS IN AUSTRIA

REF: STATE 159129

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

1. (SBU) The Austrian political leadership is generally satisfied that radicalized Muslims do not pose an imminent threat to security in Austria. Austrian media have shared that confidence and have rarely demanded more be done to root out extremism. Austria counts around 340,000 Muslims among its population - approximately 4.2%. Islam enjoys official status in Austria. The "islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Osterreich" (IGG) is the recognized organization representing believers. At the same time, the government insists that security forces keep those few residents suspected of ties with extremist groups under tight surveillance.

2. (SBU) Austria's flagship initiative to address the alienation between Islamic and Western societies is a high-level conference scheduled for November 14-16, 2005 in Vienna entitled, "Islam in a Pluralistic World." The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has invited prominent Moslem leaders for a dialog with Western counterparts and civil society experts. Confirmed Muslim participants include:

- President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan
- Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu of the Organization of Islamic countries (OIC)
- UN Sec Gen Special Advisor Lakhdar Brahimi
- First Deputy Speaker Hussain Al-Sharistani of the Iraqi National Assembly
- Religious Affairs Minister Mahmoud Zakzouk of Egypt
- Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of Malaysia for Religious Affairs Abdul Hamid Othman
- Religious Affairs Minister Ahmed Taoufiq of Lebanon.

3. (SBU) The GoA has also invited former President Khatami of Iran and many other leading figures. Austria is especially interested in obtaining the participation of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes. In Embassy's view, this conference is probably our best chance to collaborate with Austria on engaging the Muslim world. The event will have added prominence because of Austria's assumption of the rotating EU Presidency a few weeks later, on January 1, 2006.

4. (SBU) According to the Documentation Center of the

Austrian Resistance Movement, traditional right-wing groups with a pronounced anti-Semitic component are the source of most extremist ideology here. There are also a relative handful of individuals in Austria connected to the so-called "new anti-Semitism" with a left-wing, anti-globalization ideology who identify with the anti-Israel cause of Palestinian extremists. Some of the several Austrian-Arab friendship societies reportedly have members with such sympathies. However, there have been, for decades, very few violent incidents. Anti-Semitism and other extremist ideologies tend to find expression through verbal assaults, rather than physical attacks.

15. (SBU) According to an Interior Ministry report, a few sympathizers of Muslim extremist groups can be found among immigrants in Austria.

- Most prominent are sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), the Al-Gama'a al-islamiya, and the "Global Revolution" group (Hizb ut-tahrir al-islamiyya).
- There are also some supporters of the "Active Islamic Youth" group (Aktiva Islamska Omladina).
- Among Turks in Austria, there are also some supporters of Metin Kaplan. Among Iranians, there are a few sympathizers of the Iranian People's Mojahedin (Mojahedin-e-Khalq).
- Among Palestinians in Austria, there are also some supporters of Hamas.
- Some representatives of the "Salafiyya Jihadiyya" can be found, as well.
- The Interior Ministry estimates that, among the increasing number of Chechen asylum applicants in Austria, there are also some with ties to the terrorist scene in their home country.

16. (SBU) The Interior Ministry is particularly concerned that supporters of the Al-Gama'a al-islamiya in Austria could, in the course of the next years, develop new groupings with a terrorist orientation. It also sees some tendencies toward radicalization of young Muslims due to the activities of the Aktiva Islamska Omladina. Finally, MoI is concerned that increasing support for Salafiyya groupings could promote the development of a fundamentalist Islamic parallel society with a growing potential for terrorist activity.

17. (SBU) The Austrian government relies on the islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft as its official interlocutor with the Muslim communities. The IGG has reciprocated by committing itself to a sustained dialog with the Austrian state. This serves as a vehicle to

negotiate with official entities on issues of primary importance to its membership, and to Muslim immigrants in general, such as access to housing, jobs and education. However, some second- and even third-generation immigrants have clearly not integrated sufficiently to take full advantage of the benefits of Austrian residence and/or citizenship.

18. (SBU) The London Underground bombings came as a jolt to Austrian society. In subsequent weeks, media have been full of speculation about the danger of Muslim extremism in Austria. Reports have shone a bright light on potentially extremist imams and questioned whether Austrian integration policies over the past decades have been effective in easing the conditions that provide fertile ground for extreme ideologies. The government has debated new laws governing citizenship as well as expanded powers for the police and security services to monitor potential radicals. Integration policies are in a period of transition, as federal, state and local officials debate standards and methods of compliance.

19. (SBU) Those integration policies aim increasing the access of immigrants to state services, especially education, and eliciting acceptance by immigrants of "Austrian values." A variety of providers -- federal, state and local offices, as well as a host of NGOs - carry out the policies. Decision-making is primarily at the state level, however, and levels of success in this area vary by region. Much of the recent debate on state-supported integration revolves around closing loopholes that allow many immigrants to avoid programs like German language courses and to assure that family members, especially women, participate. Female participation continues to be a problem. Resistance on the part some of the more conservative immigrants raises the question in some minds whether these immigrants really want to integrate into Austrian society.

10. (SBU) The most experienced regional entity in integration matters is undoubtedly the state of Vienna. Vienna, like the other states, manages integration programs through a municipal department that assists immigrants in finding jobs and housing and gaining access to government services. It provides assistance in negotiating bureaucracies as well as counseling to help resolve conflicts with Austrian neighbors. It also distributes city money to NGOs working in the field of integration. "Foreigner [or Integration] Advisory Boards," composed of civil society representatives, also exist in all municipalities with a high proportion of non-

Austrian citizens to help governments maintain dialog with immigrant communities.

11. (SBU) The Muslim population in Austria is not as well established as in Germany and is predominantly working-class. Few models exist of economically successful, integrated Muslim members of Austrian society. It is difficult to reach this audience largely uninvolved in political, cultural or business organizations -- with the one exception of the IGG.

12. (SBU) The Embassy has cooperated with the official Islamic community (IGG) in the past. However, subsequent to the Iraq War, the IGG has made it clear on various occasions that it is presently uninterested in cooperating with the Embassy on public programming. In an unfortunate coincidence, the Embassy's 2004 Iftar reception fell on the day that U.S. troops began an offensive against Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah, leading to an extremely strained atmosphere.

13. (SBU) The de facto refusal of the IGG to continue the interaction with the Embassy makes it difficult to attract moderates who favor dialog -- who seem to be wary of risking isolation in the community if they cooperate in programming with the American Embassy. Post continues to seek out those willing to cooperate on projects they believe in despite contrary pressure from the IGG.

14. (SBU) Still, Post's efforts to make contacts outside the state-sponsored representative group for Islam have led to some openings. Presently, the Mission is planning a number of events and outreach activities to underscore our commitment to dialog with Austria's Muslims:

- Public Affairs (PA) is presently planning the visit to Vienna and Graz of Dr. Mohamad Bashar Arafat, a previous participant in a number of Department of State-supported programs, to speak on Muslim experience in America and to take part in programs on Muslim identity in the West. PA is actively working with a range of partners for this visit, including an Austrian Catholic NGO, Pro Oriente, dedicated to interfaith dialog, the theological faculty of the University of Vienna and an Egyptian organization in Graz, and with individual Muslims who are receptive to a USG-sponsored speaker. PA is also working to identify imams who would be interested in hosting Dr. Arafat at their mosques to offer Friday prayers or to lecture on issues of interest to their membership.
- A PA program offering partial scholarships to Austrian secondary school students to spend a year in the U.S. has proven highly successful in past. This year, PA has negotiated with the partner organization that organizes

these exchanges to target specifically students in the Muslim immigrant community and to increase joint support for these students in FY06. If successful in attracting Muslim high school students, we will investigate ways to increase funding for this program.

- In 2005, PA initiated a series of briefings by Embassy officers for high school classes around Austria. PA recently contacted schools in immigrant districts of Vienna to offer presentations on diversity and tolerance.

- The Embassy again plans to host an Iftar meal, which will serve to demonstrate American respect for religious diversity, remind Austrian Muslims that we are still committed to dialogue, and to advertise for upcoming programming of particular interest to them.

- If Dr. Arafat's visit is successful, Post intends to target other cities with relatively smaller, but vibrant Muslim communities with similar programming.

- PA plans to sponsor a visit by a cultural group with whom second-generation Muslims in Vienna might be able to identify in order to raise awareness among immigrant youth that the Embassy is interested in them. We will follow up with events on the model of an earlier PA-supported integration program featuring youth advocates/social workers from New York City.

- PA is exploring the feasibility of opening "mini American Corners" in Vienna district libraries that serve high percentages of Muslim residents. Material would focus on themes of tolerance, equality, and integration and could serve as a focal point for Embassy programs in neighborhoods that have yet to see an Embassy officer.